

‘Small Cultures’ in Context of English Language Teaching Innovation

Mark HAMMOND

マーク・ハモンド

Abstract

Implementing innovation in educational programs and curricula involves the interaction of social groupings of stakeholders. The purpose of this paper is to examine the role of organizational culture in the process of change and innovation in English language teaching (ELT) contexts by focusing on four aspects: access to information, collaboration, sense of ownership, and acknowledgement that meaningful change requires a long-term commitment.

1. Introduction

Within educational systems, developing and implementing innovation often involves multi-dimensional challenges and spans a wide range of participants. Particularly in large organizations, the relationships between groups of stakeholders may play a significant role in whether or not innovation is accepted or rejected. Awareness and understanding of the different micro-cultures found within organizations may lead to smoother transitions that address a wider scope of stakeholders’ concerns. This paper explores previous studies of the relationship between organizational culture and implementation of innovation in language learning programs, by focusing on four aspects: the flow of information to all stakeholders, the importance of collaboration, cross-cultural ownership of success, and the understanding that change is a long-term commitment. A review of Holliday’s (1999) ‘small culture’ paradigm is also included, to provide clarity and narrow focus to the cohesive behavior of social groupings facing emerging change in the context of English language learning and teaching.

2. Holliday’s “Small Culture” Paradigm

A common understanding of ‘culture’ takes a macro-view that involves ethnic, regional, or national behavioral characteristics. Such a view is championed by Hofstede (2011), who claims that the core elements of national culture can be categorized in accordance to the “collective programming of the mind” of those who live in a country or region (p. 3). By indexing these elements, Hofstede claims that it is possible to profile and compare the cultural tendencies of countries, which can then provide some explanation why inter-cultural relationships are often plagued by misunderstanding.

In the context of English language teaching (ELT), Holliday (1999) argues that Hofstede's wide view of culture promotes *othering*, which he describes as "the process whereby the 'foreign' is reduced to a simplistic, easily digestible, exotic or degrading stereotype" (p. 245). *Othering* may also contribute to social distance and foster broad negative judgements about the other group as a whole.

In contrast, Holliday's (1999) paradigm of "small culture" takes a micro-view that separates the notions of ethnicity and nation and focuses on "any cohesive social grouping" (p. 237) within an educational system. The boundaries of these groupings are not drawn on nationality but by common artifacts, values, and assumptions of the group. For example, in context of English language teaching at the university level, small cultures may take the form of individual academic departments, groups of adjunct instructors, factions of administrators, or policy makers from government ministries. As was the case with 'large culture' the polarizing "us versus them" mentality of *othering* can also occur at the micro level (Palfreyman, 2005, pp. 211-214), but it is based on emerging processes rather than fixed characteristics, which allows for more flexible conditions for successful adoption of innovation.

For innovation to be implemented, some strategy for engaging individual small cultures must be employed. Chin and Benne (1976, cited in Markee, 2001, p. 124) categorize three families of strategies: power-coercive, empirical-rational, and normative re-educational. A power-coercive strategy uses either political or economic power to drive implementation, such as the threat of losing a teaching position, not being promoted, or reduced departmental funding. Empirical-rational strategies are rooted in the belief that people are rational and will follow their self-interests if presented with a well-researched plan of innovation. Normative re-educative strategies are based on the idea that innovation can be successful when stakeholders are open to redefining or reinterpreting existing norms and values, and receptive to teacher training or re-education programs.

3. Cross-Cultural Factors of ELT Innovation

The role of small culture in planning, implementing, and managing innovation, can be seen in case studies and large-scale reforms to English language programs. Four salient factors, as found in several cross-cultural programs may provide insight: access to information, collaborative environment, cross-cultural ownership, and long-term commitment.

3.1. Access to information for all stakeholders.

An important aspect of the process of innovation is that information flows amongst stakeholders. Lack of information can create a breeding ground for rumor, and cause stress, mistrust, and dissent between different cultures. This is often the case when a power-coercive strategy with top-down decision making is employed, as information does not always trickle down to the teachers at the frontline of implementation.

Accessible networks of communication and common terminology are crucial for all parties to participate in trans-cultural dialogues. Walter (2012), in an evaluation of a project to develop English language textbooks in Russia, credits the success of creating nationally accepted textbooks to an early establishment of a communications network to disseminate information between teachers, publishers, governmental agencies, and program managers from multiple regions. Additionally, O'Donahue (2012) points out that a well-planned communication network gave equal access to all levels of stakeholders, which helped to troubleshoot early problems with implementation of a curriculum reform involving several international agencies and 37,000 public schools in Tamil Nadu, India. Contrastingly, McIlwraith (2012) evaluated a project between the government of Tunisia and the British Council, and specifically attributed project-management terminology as a key factor of confusion and delay in planning a new curriculum.

3.2. Collaborative environment

Engaging stakeholders from all cultures to work together is a common characteristic of successful innovation. An absence of collaboration could lead to some degree of *otherisation* and result in the *us-versus-them* perception of other cultures lacking skills, knowledge, and understanding of what is best to achieve program goals.

Summarizing findings from The JISC Curriculum Design and Delivery Programs, which comprised 27 projects related to technology and major curriculum changes at UK universities, Brown (2013) demonstrated that collaboration not only increases the chance of successful innovation, but also creates the potential empowerment of all stakeholders to contribute to contingency plans or new solutions to the original problem (p. 11). Conversely, in a case study of the national "action plan" of educational policies by Japanese ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, a study by Hato (2005) suggested that the Ministry's lack of collaboration with teachers, researchers, or "those acquainted with the reality of L2 learning" (p. 33), resulted in unattainable objectives that contributed to implementers' "stress and frustration and lack of confidence in English education in general" (p. 43).

3.3. Cross-cultural ownership of innovation

With access to information and collaboration, a sense of ownership may be achieved, if stakeholders start to see the innovation as relevant, likely to solve problems, and/or improve the educational system. Ownership brings what Prabhu (1990) refers to as a “sense of plausibility”, which allows stakeholders to break away from familiar routines and be open to change through real involvement and not just mechanical participation. Waters and Vilches (2001) use the term “potential-realizing”, to describe the crucial stage of change when ownership of the innovation is realized through application of methodology and classroom materials (p. 135).

To achieve such ownership, importance should be placed on mutual trust and respect of all stakeholders’ beliefs and values. Karavas’ (2014) research of a successful national innovation in ELT in elementary schools in Greece, suggests that the participation of teachers in both development and evaluation of teaching materials lead to a sense of ownership in the program. On the other hand, Crossey (2012), in evaluating a project to develop a curriculum for Polish military forces, determined that without the significant ownership of local stakeholders, the originally planned three to four-year project took 11 years to achieve a sense of plausibility.

3.4. Acceptance by all cultures that meaningful innovation is long-term

Even if innovation plans are effectively communicated, collaborative, and owned by all cultures, meaningful change takes time and is a systematic and on-going process that requires more than one-off workshops or explanatory meetings. Holliday (1992) makes an analogy of “tissue rejection”, a medical term that describes an organ transplant that is not accepted by the patient, to emphasize that successful innovation requires long-term follow-up care that considers the socio-cultural nature of the process of change (p. 403).

In a case study of a ten-year educational policy reform in Oman, Wedell (2012) observed that a long term commitment by stakeholders not only contributed to the success of the program but also enabled further development of coherent systems to support reforms. Whittaker (2012), in an account of the redesign of an English language program for the armed forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina, points out the importance of long-term factors, including sustainability in operating costs, stable content that remains valid over time and fits instructors with straightforward expectations. Without long-term management of innovation, teachers may develop a “hidden curriculum” and revert to “doing what they were doing before” (Kennedy, 1987, in Holliday, 1992, p. 405). Reverting to previous practice may be due to how teachers perceive their own identities, priorities, and limitations (Scheisfurth, 2011) or could be simply

a case of what urban planners refer to as *desire lines*, when pedestrians avoid the planned route of the sidewalk and make a shortcut path that serves their needs better. Li's (2001) study of an unsuccessful initiative to introduce communicative language teaching in Korean secondary schools, as well as Waters & Vilches (2008) assessment of ELT reform in the Philippines, suggest that the lack of properly funded long-term post-implementation support created conditions for teachers to lose interest and return to previous methodology.

4. Conclusion

Instead of a macro-view of culture based on perceived behavior characteristics of people who live in a particular country or region, a micro-view of culture, based on the shared behaviors and values of members of social groupings in an organization may allow for a better understanding of the importance of culture in relationship to ELT innovation. After considering culture in international case studies of innovation, several important factors emerged. Firstly, open communication channels and access to information may provide a solid base to plan and implement innovations. Additionally, collaborative efforts between cultures may reduce the degree of *otherisation* that stakeholders may feel towards each other, which can then promote a stronger sense of ownership of the innovation by all stakeholders. Moreover, acknowledging that meaningful and lasting change requires long term commitment and management is also important to build a stable innovation that reaches its full potential.

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